Don’t Film, Act

A Call for Confrontation

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It Happened Again Today, It'll Happen Again Tomorrow

In January of 2023, police in the so-called United states (at the latest count) murdered at least 73 people, brutalized hundreds more, and traumatized a near infinite constellation of others. Each day reveals a new story written to coincide with the release of the latest snuff (or attempted snuff) film directed by your local sheriff's department. Sometimes the cops provide the film equipment themselves, funded by liberal demands for accountability at every level of governance. Other times a bystander dutifully lends a hand to capture a person's final moments while they plead for someone, anyone, to help them, to do something.

Maybe there was once a time when it was reasonable to believe that capturing the brutality of police on film would mean an end to that brutality would be brought about by some righteous conscience of the society bearing witness, but that time (if it ever did exist) is certainly long gone now. Year after year, brutal video after brutal video, we find ourselves inhabiting the same world of the police, their cruelty, and their brutality.

Your footage will not save anyone, you are not exposing some unknown side of the American cop. We know what the police are, and we know what they do. It's what they've always done. The footage of the murder of Eric Garner didn't prevent the murder of George Floyd. The footage of the murder of George Floyd didn't prevent the murder of Tyre Nichols. And the footage of the murder of Tyre Nichols won't prevent the next cop from killing the next person whose name will be added to a list that has grown so long that its growth is assumed to be inevitable.

In the most unambiguous terms I can muster, whether captured on a body cam or a cell phone, whether amassing retweets on Twitter or opening the hour on the nightly news, footage will never be able to prevent the violence captured within its frame. Once it has been filmed, you are too late. We are all too late. The moment of potential intervention is gone.

But we don't have to film.

We don't have to be passive observers when the violence of policing breaks out in our proximity.

We can act.

The Fear and Moralization of Observation

A person runs down the sidewalk, two cops are in chase close behind. As the person passes you one of the cops catches up and manages to tackle them to the ground, quickly placing a knee in their back and holding their head to the ground. The second cop pulls his Taser and begins to scream commands, often contradicting with those shouted by the first cop. The person held on the ground is clearly frightened, in pain. Their eyes are scanning a growing crowd, they cry out for help. People begin filming.

What compels a person to raise a camera when incredible violence befalls another person in their proximity rather than run to their aid. What forces craft a way of relating to the world in which that response makes the most sense, even for people who ostensibly care about limiting the violence of policing. Those who don't care, or who are supportive of such violence aside, the most obvious answer would seem to be fear.

To act is to take on the responsibility of acting, which means you'll likely face some consequence (legal, societal, physical) that you might be afraid of. When staring at the reality of

policing, it opens the possibility that to act would "invite" the same violence on yourself. This is itself rooted in the assumption that the targets of police violence must have done something to "invite" that violence upon themselves. The truth, as far too many know, is that within a world dominated by deference to capital, to colonialism, to anti-blackness, to cisheterosexism, police will always find a target for their violence. No invitation is needed.

Depending on their relation to police violence more broadly one begins to rationalize their fear in different ways. For many their fear is rationalized as a "strategic decision" to film rather than act.

"Maybe the very act of observing will force the cops to limit their violence during an arrest" (which of course ignores the incredible violence of every part of an arrest that comes after you're placed in the squad car).

"If I were to act it would just put the person in greater danger than they already are" offering some convenient prophetic connection to a future yet unwritten.

"What good would it do for two of us to be beaten and jailed?"

For others their fear is less about physical/legal/social safety and more about the fear that if they were to acknowledge that acting is an option, it would force them to reconsider all prior situations in which they didn't act.

For those with less reason to personally fear police (often stemming from their proximity to whiteness and capital) the rationalization shifts from one of "strategy" to one of moralization. In order to justify their inaction to themselves, the observer rationalizes bearing witness as a moral act, a duty even. Those being arrested, beaten, and murdered become martyrs for the cause of these people's self-actualization. To bear witness to this incredible violence and to be moved to sympathy by it is to be a "good person". And secure in their belief that they are now "good" they are free to go about their day.

The outcry of the moral observer is never about ending the police and their world. It is performance of moral duty to convey moral disposition. The performance becomes ritualized, becomes ritual. It becomes another weapon in the arsenal of the state and its defenders.

Footage as Counterinsurgency

On January 7th of this year, Tyre Nichols was beaten by several members of the Memphis Police Department. He died in the hospital three days later. His family demanded answers of what happened that night, their lawyers calling for release of any relevant footage from either body cams or nearby surveillance cameras.

In the days that followed it was revealed, despite initial claims to the contrary, that there existed footage from a security camera across the street from where the beating took place. Instantly every news station began a countdown to the public release of this latest snuff film. We were flooded with articles and statements warning of the horrific and graphic nature of the film. We were told to brace ourselves as the hours ticked closer to the release date, told that what we were to witness would be a violence so aberrant and so severe that it might shake us to our very core.

Every politician and every public official made statements urging calm, begging for civility amidst the whirlwind of rage we might feel, ash from the third precinct still caught in the back of their throats. These calls were echoed by the nonprofits and the named orgs with ascendant

leaders seeking positions of institutional power, desperate to demonstrate their capabilities of tempering and directing the emotions of those under their purview.

The spectacle of the release date continued to grow as five of the officers involved in Tyre's murder were fired and charged on the 26th of January. Everything seemed to scream "Look! We're listening, we're holding the system accountable. Justice will be served!" Even still, cities across the country prepared for the street conflicts of 2020.

And as the video surfaced on the 27th the response in the streets was undercut by this weeks-long pageantry. The entire ordeal of the footage, from the announcement of its existence to its ultimate release, served to funnel the energy, that might have otherwise arisen organically, into well managed and prepared-for scenarios.

The liberal activists, the nonprofits, the wannabe politicians were all satisfied with the cops being fired and charged. After all, they don't want an end to policing and certainly not its violence. They simply want that violence to be controlled and enacted more specifically against those who their sensibilities deem worthy of harm. Their boldest dream is of a world in which all types of people are brutalized and murdered by the police at proportionate rates.

The state, more specifically the police, will make whatever sacrifices necessary to preserve its own legitimacy. State actors have learned that they can better maintain their legitimacy by quickly and decisively firing/charging some of those within the state's ranks. They have learned to use what was once considered incriminating footage (of the system) to help in that task. Every cop not caught in the frame of this footage is offered cover by the handful that find themselves in a courtroom. While not touched on in any more depth here, I implore you to consider the ways in which this calculated sacrifice also justifies the world of prisons.

I remember seeing images of signs at a protest in Memphis with the common phrase "Justice for Tyre" and feeling sick. Tyre is dead. There is no justice to be found for him now. We've already failed him by allowing the continued existence of this world of policing, and no amount of footage, however horrific, will ever do anything to change that.

There is no way out but to destroy the police and their world.

What it Takes to End This World

Put simply, if we are serious about ending the world of police then we must cultivate a culture of confrontation and antagonism against police whenever and wherever we can. While my ultimate desires involve every brick from every precinct being thrown into the ocean, in the meantime I offer some visions of what this cultivated antagonism might look like in action:

- The instinctive cursing and verbal berating of every cop who walks down the street, or enters a coffee shop, or has his window rolled down. Any cop anywhere in public should be made to feel like shit and they are unwelcome.
- Every time a cop leaves his cruiser unattended, to write a ticket, chase someone on foot, or just to pick up lunch, he returns to find its tires slashed, its paint keyed up and maybe even its windows busted out.
- Whenever a cop tries to trespass an unhoused neighbor from the patio of a restaurant, others arrive with food to eat with their new friends and berate the cop until he either leaves or the following takes place

- Every time a cop attempts to make an arrest they are required to do so with fists and legs and bats and rocks hitting them until either they give up or until a full-scale riot breaks out. Either way, they will pay for every single person they put their hands on.

These types of actions may seem absurd, risky, or impossible but I dare you to treat them as attainable realities and consider what actions you could take to help bring them about. Every struggle for life against domination necessitates a willingness to protect ourselves and each other from the police. I believe that it is in this open antagonism that we might be able to best care for each other.

It seems to me it isn't that there aren't enough people who care to end the horrors of the world of police and prisons, but rather that most of these people believe that *others* don't care, which limits them from taking the types of actions that might actually bring about such an end.

And so the project becomes to find, build, and foster connections with others who have similar desires this can be done through consistently tabling zines and stickers in the same part of town. If that feels too difficult it can be done asynchronously through consistent flyering and stickering to let others know that they aren't alone in this locale. You can drop relevant literature in newspaper boxes or on the tables of outdoor patios. You can publicly screen films. You can graffiti. You can drop banners Just make your presence known and break the illusion of civil society. Allow yourself to experiment, remain nimble. Be willing to get kicked in the teeth (either metaphorically or unfortunately literally) and still do whatever you can to claw your way back to verticality. Fight for your life. Fight for life writ large.

Conflict with the police must not be something that we reserve for demos (though it certainly should occur there as well). It needs to be integrated in how we move through the world, how we talk with our neighbors, how we walk down the sidewalk, how we breathe. We must break open space, with whatever means we have at our disposal, for resistance to become ingrained in daily life. We must embolden each other to fight back.

I want more. I want better. I want all of this for myself and for all those around me. Help me. Help yourself. Take the possibility of a world without police seriously, and begin bringing it about with every breath.

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